

DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH REPORT

NEILSON FARM OUTBUILDINGS

SARATOGA NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

John F. Lazader, Park Historian

November 17, 1958

*DCR Library*  
DIVISION OF HISTORY

N.P.S.

FILE COPY

Introduction The purpose of this study is to assemble all of the information available concerning the outbuildings that existed on the John Neilson Farm at Bemis Heights in the autumn of 1777. The objective of the research is to determine the number, location, and character of these structures, and to record the part that they may have played in the events attending the Battles of Saratoga, September 19 and October 7, 1777. The information collected may prove useful in planning for the development of the Bemis Heights section of Saratoga National Historical Park, which is Stop Number 2 on the proposed tour route.

Early History of the Neilson Farm John Neilson leased Lot 21 of the Old Saratoga Patent by an indenture to Kilian de Ridder in 1774, a shortly thereafter established a home there.  
1

When the American forces moved northward in their attempt to stop Burgoyne's advance on Albany the farm of John Neilson was included within the lines of the fortified camp that Major General Horatio Gates established on Bemis Heights, and the Neilson home became quarters for American officers. The details of the farm's connection with the battles of Saratoga have been discussed in the Historic Data Section of the Historic Saratoga  
2

Building Report, John Neilson House, May 22, 1957.

Contemporary Materials Relating to the Neilson Outbuildings Contemporary American sources have nothing to say about the Neilson Farm buildings. An examination of the Gates Papers, Schuyler Papers, Varick Papers, Livingston Papers, and of a number of diaries and memoirs of participants contain no references to the buildings that occupied the farm lot on Bemis Heights.

An examination of contemporary American maps is not much more rewarding. Varick's map, which was drawn on the back of a letter to General Schuyler on September 12, 1777, does not indicate any buildings other than the house identified as Poor's Quarters.<sup>3</sup> Putnam's map contains no references to buildings of any type.<sup>4</sup>

The only contemporary documentary references that have been located that mention any buildings are those of Baron von Riedesel and his wife. In his letter to the Duke of Brunswick, dated October 21, 1777, Riedesel related:

Dem 7ten October de Morgens 11 Uhr wurden 700 Mann von Fraser, 300 von Breymann, 200 von rechten und 300 von linken Flügel commandirt, nebst 8 Cannonen, um die Reconnaissance vorzunehmen. Wir marschirten in 3 Colonnen rechts ab, verjagten den Feind aus einem retranchirten Hause, und nahmen Possession von einer Höhe vis a vis von einem Schulhaus, hinter welchem auf einer Anhöhe deren linker Flügel postirt stand.

Translation

On the 7th of October at 11 o'clock in the morning 700 men of Fraser, 300 of Breygmann, 200 from the right and 300 from the left wing were commandered along with 8 cannon, order to undertake the reconnaissance. We marched off to the right in 3 columns, drove the enemy from a retrenched house, and took possession of a hill opposite a schoolhouse, behind which on a hill their left wing was stationed. 5

The Baroness recorded in her Memoirs that:

...The left wing extended on a height, upon the top of which stood a school house, and its left flank was likewise screened on the side of the hill by felled trees. 6

Because the American position was almost entirely screened from the enemy's view, British and Assawan troops had only an imperfect view of the Neilson Farm, except, of course, those who were captured or entered the American works under a flag. The view that the Baron had was, thus, from a distance of about three quarters of a mile, and what he thought was a school house was apparently another type of building, perhaps a barn with either a cupola or a steeple on it. There is no records of a school building anywhere near the scene of the battles.

The British maps of the area do not include any details of the center and left portions of the American fortified camp. Because it was impossible to reconnoiter those sectors, the area was simply termed "Ground of the Enemy."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, research into contemporary sources has revealed very little information of any real value concerning the buildings that stood in the vicinity of John Neilson's house.

#### Later References to Neilson Farm Buildings

Turning to later accounts of the battles and visits to the Battle-field, several references were found to at least two other structures on the Neilson Farm.

In narrating his visit of August, 1830, Jared Sparks recalled:

Within the limits of Gates's old camp we found Mr. Nelson, who lived there at the time on his own Farm, and was present in the encampment nearly the whole time it was occupied by the American army. He as well as Buel, recollected the location of several of the different corps of the Army and the Head Quarters of the Generals. Arnold, Poor and Patterson occupied Nelson's house, which is now standing and makes the kitchen of his present tenant.

present tenement. Morgan occupied another building of his, which since has been torn down. Gates's head quarters were nearby, a little to the south. The House went to decay, and was taken down last year. These appear to have been all the houses within the encampment. 8

Writing in 1844, Charles Neilson, son of John, stated:

While these preparations were going on at the British camp, the Americans were not idle. They now extended and completed their line of breastworks, from the north-eastern angle of the river hills, west, across the farm then owned by the late John Neilson, Esq., deceased, about three-fourths of a mile, to the Heights on the left, and to within a few rods of his dwelling house, the entrenchments extended south and southwest, about three-fourths of a mile, to a great ravine. At the north-west angle stood a large log barn, which was strengthened by a double tier of logs on three sides, and strong batteries in circular form, extending from each extremity, south, about one hundred and fifty feet, and encircled by a deep trench and palisades or pickets; the whole area within the circle of the pickets, was near half an acre, and out of respect to the owner, who was a very active Whig, it was honored with the name of Fort Neilson. 9

This is the first specific reference that has been located concerning the existence of a barn in the angle of the American fortified line. However, this barn may have been the building referred to by the Riedegels as a school house. The proximity to the Neilson home would make the location of a barn at this site very logical. It may also be noted that this represents the first reference to the term, Fort Neilson. None of the contemporary sources mentions the name, nor do any of the accounts of the campaign that were written between the battles and the publication of Neilson's book in 1844. While it is possible that the name was bestowed upon this portion of the American line, the fact, that no other sector received a name and that no mention of it is contained in any contemporary accounts throws some doubt upon its authenticity. Perhaps the name was applied locally for several years, and Neilson believed that it dated from the time of the battles. However,

care should be exercised in perpetuating a term that is based upon so uncertain an authority.

The same care might be exercised in identifying and interpreting the barn. If the barn was there, which seems probable, the reason for fortifying it is obscure. According to Putnam's map, a battery was located approximately north of the site, and the angle of the line where it changed its course from northwest to southwest was in the vicinity of the barn, but there would appear to be no reason for making the barn into a fortified structure, unless it were being used as a command post, of which there is no evidence. Charles Neilson was a very credulous person, and he accepted without any criticism the word of mouth traditions that he had received from his parents and their neighbors. Many details in his book have not been able to stand careful examination; errors of fact are too common to make the work a very trust-worthy authority.

In 1848, Benson J. Lossing visited the area in connection with the preparation of his Field-Book of the Revolution. He repeated the story of the fortified barn and the naming of Fort Neilson, then he adds another building a few yards northwest of the Neilson home, identifying it as Arnold's quarters.<sup>19</sup>

On these authorities depends all that is known concerning the houses that were part of the Nielson Farm. On the basis of this very slight accumulation of evidence, it would seem that a log barn occupied the approximate site of the current Blockhouse-Museum. This building was probably converted to some undetermined military use. There was also a log cabin, the one that had housed Neilson and his wife while his house was being built, and which may have been used by Colonel Daniel Morgan



for quarters. These are the only buildings, except the dwelling, of which there is any evidence. In fact, it would have been strange if there had been more buildings on the farm in 1777. The Neilsons had been there only about two and one-half years, and this was a newly settled frontier farm. About the only buildings that one would have expected to find would have been the barn, dwelling, and perhaps the cruder cabin that had housed the young couple while their frame house was being erected. The fact the John Neilson was away from home for several weeks during 1776 and 1777 with the Militia would make the absence of more extensive development even more understandable.

The paucity of evidence precludes any definitive statement concerning the farm buildings that occupied Bemis Heights at the time of the Battles of Saratoga. No contemporary descriptions have been discovered; official records, military and civil, are silent on the subjects and any conclusions concerning the farmstead would, of necessity, be conjectural.

Because of the inconclusive character of the documentary evidence, any definite knowledge concerning the subject would have to come from archeological research. That this might be promising is indicated by the fact that during the 1941 archeological program the footing for what may have been the log cabin mentioned above was uncovered by former  
10  
Archeologist Robert Ehrich. Such research may reveal more about the number, character, and utilization of the Neilson Farm buildings.

# FOOTNOTES

1. Heilson Papers, Saratoga National Historical Park
2. Luzader, John F., Historic Data Section, Historic Building Survey Report, John Heilson House, Saratoga National Historical Park, Part I., May 22, 1957.
3. General Philip Schuyler Papers, New York Public Library
4. Map, Orthographical View of the American and British Armies on the 7th & 8th of October 1777. drawn by Rufus Putnam.
5. Danforth Collection, New York Public Library.
6. Riedesel, von, Frederika, Berufe Reise nach Amerika, Berlin, 1800, pp. 99-100.
7. Map, Plan of the Encampment and Position of the Army under His Excellency Lt. General Burgoyne at Bemis Heights on Hudson's River near Stillwater etc., drawn by William C. Wilkinson.
8. Sparks, Jared, Journal No. Jared Sparks Collection, Widener Library, Harvard University.
9. Heilson, Charles, An Original Compiled and Corrected Account of Burgoyne's Campaign and the Memorable Battles of Bemis Heights September 19 and Oct. 7, 1777. From the Most Authentic Sources and Information Including Many Interesting Incidents Connected With the Case, J. Munsell, Albany, 1844, pp. 154-155.
10. Lessing, Benson J., Field-Book of the Revolution, Harper Bros., 1851, vol. I, p. 47.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF  
SOURCES CONSULTED

Primary Sources

Benjamin Collection, New York Public Library

Gates Papers, New York Public Library

Gates Papers, Library of Congress

Livingston Papers, New York Public Library

Neilson Papers, Saratoga National Historical Park

Schuyler Papers, New York Public Library

Schuyler Papers, New York State Library, Albany, N. Y.

Varick Papers, New York Public Library

Riedesel, von, Frederika, Berufs Reise nach Amerika, Berlin, 1800.

Sparkes, Jared, Journal Ms. Jared Sparkes Collection, Widener Library, Harvard University.

Secondary Sources

Lossing, Benson J., Field-Book of the Revolution, Harper Bros., New York, 1851.

Neilson, Charles, An Original Compiled and Corrected Account of Burgoyne's Campaign and the Memorable Battles of Bemis Heights September 19 and Oct. 7, 1777. From the Most Authentic Sources and Information Including Many Interesting Incidents Connected With the Same, J. Munsell, Albany, 1884.

Documentary Study

Legader, John F., Historic Data Section, Historic Building Survey Report, John Neilson House, Saratoga National Historical Park, Part I.

County Records

Albany County Dead Books